OBJECTIVE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCES

PETER MCCORMICK
(The University of Ottawa,
Internationale Akademie für Philosophie im Liechtenstein)

One recurring philosophical problem about aesthetics and ethics concerns the connections between artworks and the world. And one of the many questions that may arise in this connection is the following: are all aesthetic experiences of artistic work exclusively subjective experiences? In this paper I try to offer several considerations in support of the view that some aesthetic experiences of what I have called elsewhere the « negative sublime » are not exclusively subjective; they are partly objective in a strong sense. In what sense?

Some aesthetic experiences of the negative sublime may include aspects that derive from elements in artistic works that embody strongly independent features of the actual world including values. These aspects I will be calling « negative aesthetic values ». My concluding suggestion will be that apprehending some of these aspects today may be required for rightly leading one’s life.

1. « THE HOT BONE-HOUSE »

Consider a beautiful passage from the conclusion of the Nobel laureate, Seamus Heaney’s 1999 English translation of the Beowulf poem from the Old English or Anglo-Saxon (London, 1999). This nordic epic, we are credibly told, « is about the monstrous, defeating it, being exhausted by it and then having to live on, physically and psychically exposed, in that exhausted aftermath » (book jacket).

Beowulf, after returning from two overwhelming and increasingly difficult struggles with the monstrous to liberate his Danish neighbours, and after reigning as their king for many years over his own southern
Swedish people, the Geats, Beowulf, succeeds, but only after immensely demanding efforts, in defeating the monstrous a final time.

This time however the unthinkably powerful monstrous has arisen not from without, but from within the depths of his own people’s thousand year history and his own brief life.

And this time the monstrous wounds Beowulf mortally. His grieving people burn his body – his « bone-house », the poet calls it – on a funereal pyre. And a woman cries out horrific premonitions of the unthinkable sufferings now awaiting her and her people in the absence of their heroic defender.

The passage runs:

On a height [the Geat people] kindled the hugest of all funeral fires; fumes of woodsmoke billowed darkly up, the blaze roared and drowned out their weeping, wind died down and flames wrought havoc in the hot bone-house, burning it to the core. They were disconsolate and wailed aloud for their lord’s decease.

A Geat woman too sang out in grief; with her hair bound up, she unburdened herself of her worst fears, a wild litany of nightmares and lament: her nation invaded, enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles, slavery and abasement. Heaven swallowed the smoke.

(ll. 3143-55)

Now, much would need to be said about such a climactic passage were we to come eventually to some not unsatisfactory understanding of its sense and significance. And here we are merely touching on what Heaney has called « a work of the greatest imaginative vitality, a masterpiece where the structuring of the tale is as elaborate as the beautiful contrivances of its language. Its narrative elements may belong to a previous age but as a work of art it lives in its own continuous present, equal to our knowledge of reality in the present time » (IX).

Nonetheless, even without the extraordinary scholarly resources thorough understanding requires, some may read such work with appreciation. They read slowly, and reread slowly, the familiar details of men’s fiery burials and women’s dark lamentations. They bring to such details both what they perceive in the poem’s languages and their own